

November 17, 2019
The Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost—Proper 28
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Isaiah 65:17-25
Canticle 9
2 Thessalonians 3:6-13
Luke 21:5-19

“When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, Jesus said, ‘As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.’”¹

By the time the Gospel of Luke was written down, these words attributed to Jesus had come to pass. The Jewish temple in Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans, and the Judaism it ordered was in flux. In this passage, Jesus is addressing his close followers, for the last time before heading to Jerusalem and death. By the time the Gospel of Luke was written down, Jesus’ words about arrests and persecutions had also come to pass.

Maybe it’s just me, but we seem to occupy a uniquely anxious time. Maybe it’s just me, but it’s helpful to know that Christianity was born during a uniquely anxious time. Maybe it’s just me, but it’s helpful to remember that since then there has been a succession of uniquely anxious times.

One anxiety for clergy of this anxious time is the throwing down of our churches, both literal and metaphorical. The ecclesial landscape is shifting at high speed here in Connecticut. Today’s Gospel reading only intensified the pondering I had already been doing about the history of St. Thomas’s Church. This coming Wednesday brings our celebration of new ministry and my installation as rector. In the 171-year history of the church, I am only its sixth rector; I will let you do the math. It probably makes sense that the stories of my predecessors would be heavy on my mind.

We tend not to have many long-established parishioners here. Perhaps that leaves us a bit detached from the church’s history. In some ways, that’s good; after all, we are less bound by the past and more free to move into the future. On the other hand, that history might be the source of understanding and connection, maybe even of sustenance and inspiration. And so today I want to talk a little about the history of St. Thomas’s, and give voice to the church’s first rector.

The history of St. Thomas’s is unusual in many ways. Let’s begin with its founding. There were already two Episcopal churches in New Haven. For some unknown reason a group of lay people decided that there needed to be a third. To this day, Trinity on the Green claims that St. Thomas’s was established as a mission of Trinity on the Green. But that’s just not true, according to the definitive early history of St. Thomas’s, which was written and published by its second rector. The organizers of St. Thomas’s originally held worship in a rented lecture hall. After a time property was acquired—on Elm Street just off the New Haven Green, only a couple of hundred yards away from Trinity. You have to wonder what that was all about, but that memory doesn’t seem to have been retained.

St. Thomas's first worship service was held on Easter Sunday of 1848. That was also the day the church's first rector took up his duties. The Rev. Eben Edwards Beardsley, D.D., would go on to serve for nearly 44 years—right up until his death in 1891. He died on December 21, which is the Feast of St. Thomas. Beardsley was a prominent figure in the Episcopal Church in Connecticut and the Episcopal Church nationally. He is noted as an important church historian; he wrote early biographies of Samuel Seabury and Samuel Johnson. Many of his sermons were published and survive to this day.

I want to offer some excerpts of the sermon Beardsley preached on Easter Sunday of 1873. That Easter marked the 25th anniversary of St. Thomas's. In that anniversary sermon, he talks about the church's founding. He's one interesting tidbit:

The faith of those who originated [the parish] was larger than their personal influence or their pecuniary ability, and because the enterprize (sic) was thus commenced, some honestly feared that it would prove a failure. Before much had been done, and while the new organization was attracting the attention of Episcopalians in the city, a zealous Christian woman, now gone to her rest, was one day asked by a friend "why it was named St. Thomas's Church?" And the rather sarcastic reply was given, that "she did not know unless it was to indicate the doubtfulness of the project."²

On that lot on Elm Street was constructed first a "temporary" and later a more permanent church building. The debt incurred was a sustained burden for years. I should note that St. Thomas's moved to this location in 1939, after the population moved out of its urban neighborhood and into these young suburbs. Financing this building was also difficult, and maintaining it likely to remain a continuing challenge. In that 25th-anniversary sermon, Beardsley recognizes parishioners for paying it the original building debt, and then he offers this:

It is not, however, in temporalities that we are to look for the best measure of parochial growth. No compact purely can be made between the Church and men of business, that if the one will keep their consciences and take care of their souls, the other will supply the means of supporting and extending Christian ministrations. While Christ would have us faithful stewards and show by our charities that we are alive to the outward beauty and maintenance of His house, this, let me say, is not the highest demand. It is not what He died and rose again for,—not what He instituted His church and appointed His ministry for. He would have us take up the cross and follow Him. He would have us receive into our hearts the Gospel which we preach, and "by which," as St. Paul says, "ye are saved, if ye keep in memory what I preached unto you, unless ye have believed in vain."

Hence it is that we place before outward prosperity and first in our ministrations the inner life, the growth in spiritual things, the being blessed and built up in that which is far better than all, the walk of holiness and righteousness. ...³

Expressing appreciation for the building but also reminding the people to look for God outside its walls, Beardsley sounds a lot like our own Bishop Ian Douglas today. There is much in Beardsley's sermon of 146 years ago that rings startlingly true today. For example, he notes that many people have left New Haven and the congregation for other locales. One of the reasons this sermon interested me is that he delivered not long after the end of the Civil War. The Civil War must have felt at least as apocalyptic as our own time. I'm going to end my own sermon with an extended section of Beardsley's sermon. It's a bit long, but please bear with me. Again, Beardsley is reflecting on changes since 1848, speaking in 1873. He offers this:

The progress of the city in the same period has been great. The population has trebled, and the advance in wealth and public improvements can only be measured by going back and comparing the past with the present. It must be owned that the Episcopal Church in New Haven has done no more than keep pace with the growth of the town. In common with other Christian bodies, it has had evils to contend with which have served to deaden its true life. The late civil war, that rocked the nation to its center, not only checked for the time the prosperous business of the place, but left here as elsewhere a legacy of sufferings, sorrows, and bereavements. Though, in the providence of God, it settled political questions forever which had long been perplexing, yet out of that momentous struggle has issued a brood of uncomputed mischiefs overspreading the land, and working injury in various ways to the cause of pure and undefiled religion. The greed for gain, the spirit of speculation, the extravagances of living, consequent upon suddenly acquired wealth,—the intense worldliness which is confined to no class,—the blunted moral sense of public servants, reaching down from the higher to the lower stations,—the awful desecration of the Christian Sabbath, the neglect of God's house,—the forgetfulness in families that there is a retribution for the infraction of His laws,—the sensuality which runs into absolute and direct vice,—the latent scepticism of scientists, the misbeliefs of men and women, the sneers at virtue, the denials of truth,—the cold scorn of the doctrine of the Cross of Christ in all its simplicity and soul-dividing power,—what are these but hindrances to the work of the ministry and the progress of the Church?

This is certainly a very important and interesting period in which to live. Our lot is cast in an age of movement, and quickened impulses, and religious thought has not the sobriety of former years. It has taken on many new and strange aspects, but we are not to be dismayed by them, or by what some appear to regard as dangers of the gravest character. "God is our God forever and ever." The old truths remain, the old promises stand, and it is our wisdom as well as our safety to cherish them; to abide steadfastly and unitedly, as in years gone, by the Church, by that which is well known and well approved in faith and practice. "Mark ye well her bulwarks, consider her palaces; that ye may tell it to the generation following."

We cannot expect in such an age to pursue in everything the precise steps of our fathers. They loved, for example,—because it was the fashion of the day, or because they could not build any better,—the plain wooden churches of half a century ago, with uncomfortable pews and inconvenient chancel arrangements; and they sung to the music of the flute, the clarinet, and the bass viol,—but he would be a churchman of singular tastes and conformation who should be willing to go back to these, and give up our improved churches and chancels; and the sound of the organ which is designed to accompany the voice and help the people, “yea, all the people praise Thee, O God.” What we may, and ought to imitate them in is a simplicity of devotion, and a reverence and affection for the venerable formularies of our faith. We ought to hold fast the treasures we have received, and transmit them to “the generations following” as they have come to us,—neither misled with the idea that any mortal can think out a new gospel or change the rule of Christian duty,—nor giving subjection for one hour to minds that seem to bury the truth in doubts, or to overshadow the Cross with Ritualism. If in any respect we have had opportunities of rising to a better, tone of religious or church feeling than our fathers, let us be thankful, and pray God to bless and keep us in all the ways of truth and righteousness, that our works and charities may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing. Let us continue in the things which we have learned and been assured of, and let us lift up our souls to God, the Holy Ghost, that He may breathe over them His renewing influences. We need Divine help as much to enable us to live, as we need it to strengthen us to die. The Gospel is for life, not for death,—and the more we soar upward to the mercy-seat now, the better prepared shall we be to endure days of trial, and the firmer and truer will be the strength and beauty of our Christian life,—just as the forest tree which, while flinging its trunk and branches high towards the heavens, strikes its roots for safety and nourishment ever deeper and deeper into the soil beneath.⁴

Notes

¹ Luke 21:5-6 NRSV.

² E.E. Beardsley, “A Sermon Preached in St. Thomas’s Church, New Haven, Easter, 1873, The Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of the Parish,” (New Haven: Tuttle, Morehouse and Taylor, Printers, 1873), available online from Project Canterbury at <http://anglicanhistory.org/usa/eebeardsley/thomas1873.html> (accessed November 17, 2019).

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.